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STATE FOR NEA/PD, NEA/ARP, AND NEA/P; EMBASSIES AND CONSULATES  
FOR PA

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [SA](#)  
SUBJECT: A SAUDI RAMADAN FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM

REFERENCE: (A) 98 RIYADH 04122; (B) JEDDAH 01368

1. SUMMARY. RAMADAN IN SAUDI ARABIA THIS YEAR HAS TAKEN ON A CHARACTER QUITE DIFFERENT FROM RAMADANS PAST. SAUDI RAMADAN IS TRADITIONALLY CHARACTERIZED BY DAYTIME INACTIVITY AND NIGHTTIME ENERGY, WITH SAUDIS PASSING SOMNAMBULANT DAYS AT WORK FOLLOWING NIGHT-LONG FLINGS OF EATING, SHOPPING AND VISITING RELATIVES. DAILY WORKING HOURS IN GOVERNMENT OFFICES ARE OFFICIALLY REDUCED TO FROM 8 HOURS TO 5; AND, WHILE GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES ARE REQUIRED TO REPORT TO WORK, IT HAS BEEN LARGELY UNDERSTOOD THAT THEY ARE EXCUSED FROM ACTUALLY WORKING. EACH YEAR, WHEN THE GOVERNMENT ANNOUNCES THE REDUCTION IN WORKING HOURS FOR RAMADAN, IT IS CUSTOMARY FOR IT TO LIKEWISE ANNOUNCE THE CLOSURE OF SCHOOLS BY THE END OF THE FIRST WEEK OF THE MONTH. THIS YEAR, HOWEVER, IN WHAT APPEARS TO BE AN ATTEMPT TO GRADUALLY CHANGE SAUDIS' BEHAVIORAL APPROACH TO RAMADAN, UNIVERSITIES REMAINED OPEN THROUGH THE FIRST TWO WEEKS OF THE MONTH (AND HELD EXAMS), AND THE GOVERNMENT ORDERED SCHOOLS TO REMAIN OPEN THROUGH THE FIRST THREE WEEKS OF RAMADAN (AND DIRECTED THAT MID-YEAR EXAMS BE ADMINISTERED DURING THIS PERIOD). THIS CHANGE HAS BEEN ACCOMPANIED BY A HEIGHTENED LEVEL OF PUBLIC ACTIVITY BY GOVERNMENT LEADERS AND OFFICIALS, SENDING A SIGNAL THAT THE KINGDOM REMAINS "OPEN FOR BUSINESS," DESPITE ITS BEING RAMADAN. THIS HAS HAD A MARKED EFFECT ON THE BEHAVIOR, AND MOOD, OF SAUDIS. JUST ONE YEAR AFTER CROWN PRINCE ABDULLAH ANNOUNCED THAT "THE BOOM TIMES ARE OVER" (REFTEL (A)), THE LEADERSHIP APPEARS TO BE USING RAMADAN TO REINFORCE ITS "WAKE UP CALL" TO THE SAUDI POPULACE. END SUMMARY.

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TESTED TEMPERS  
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2. THE OBSERVATION REPORTED BY AMCONGEN JEDDAH (REFTEL (B), PARA. 8) -- THAT THE CONTINUATION OF SCHOOLING, AND THE ADMINISTRATION OF MID-TERM EXAMS, THROUGH THE THIRD WEEK OF RAMADAN HAS FRAYED TEMPERS AND DISRUPTED TRADITIONAL RAMADAN FAMILY LIFE -- HAS BEEN THE SOURCE OF CONSIDERABLE COMMENT IN THE SAUDI MEDIA. THIS UNPRECEDENTED PHENOMENON HAS MEANT THAT THE CUSTOMARY HIGH-LEVEL OF NIGHTTIME ACTIVITY DURING THE MONTH HAS BEEN LARGELY REDUCED, AND REPLACED BY MORE NORMAL DAYTIME ACTIVITY. EVEN CASUAL OBSERVATIONS AROUND RIYADH REVEAL THAT THE USUAL DENSE NIGHTTIME TRAFFIC HAS TAPERED OFF, FAR FEWER RECKLESS STUDENTS ARE CRUISING THE STREETS AIMLESSLY, AND EVEN THE LEVEL OF TRAFFIC ACCIDENTS SEEMS TO HAVE DROPPED. BECAUSE OF EXAMS, FAMILIES ARE COMPELLED TO STAY HOME, AND HAVE MUCH LESS TIME FOR SHOPPING, TO THE POINT -- APPARENTLY -- OF IMPACTING THE SAUDI RAMADAN TRADITION OF REPLACING THE FURNITURE IN THEIR HOUSES: THE USUAL RIYADH STREET SCENE OF TRUCKS FULL OF CARPETS AND FURNITURE HAS BEEN LARGELY UNOBSERVED THIS YEAR.

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A CONSPICUOUS LACK OF CONSUMPTION  
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3. THE IMPACT OF THE GOVERNMENT'S DECISION FOR SCHOOLS TO REMAIN OPEN HAS DRAWN MEDIA ATTENTION TO THE CHANGED CONSUMER BEHAVIOR THAT HAS RESULTED. "AL-HAYAT," FOR EXAMPLE, ON DECEMBER 25 PUBLISHED AN ARTICLE UNDER THE HEADLINE "RETREAT OF RETAIL SALES IN THE KINGDOM FOR THE FIRST HALF OF RAMADAN." THE ARTICLE NOTES THAT, DESPITE AGGRESSIVE PROMOTIONAL CAMPAIGNS -- INCLUDING DISCOUNTING BY MORE THAN

40 PERCENT, ALONG WITH FREE GIFTS AND OTHER INCENTIVES -- CONSUMER SPENDING IS FAR BELOW TRADITIONAL RAMADAN LEVELS; THE ARTICLE TIES THIS DECLINE TO THE FACT THAT MID-YEAR EXAMS ARE BEING HELD DURING RAMADAN. THE "AL-HAYAT" ARTICLE ALSO NOTES THAT SAUDI MERCHANTS HAD BEEN EXPECTING THE NORMAL 250- TO 300-PERCENT INCREASE IN RETAIL SALES DURING RAMADAN, BUT THAT CURRENT ESTIMATIONS ARE FOR AN INCREASE OF NO MORE THAN 40- TO 60-PERCENT.

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A CHANGE FOR THE BETTER  
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¶4. IN ALL RESPECTS THE CHANGES WHICH HAVE BEEN INDUCED IN SAUDI BEHAVIOR THROUGH THE RAMADAN SCHOOL CALENDAR HAVE BEEN FOR THE BETTER. THE ABSENCE OF YOUNG SAUDI MALES CRUISING THE STREETS AND SHOPPING MALLS AT ALL HOURS, THE REDUCTION IN RECKLESS AND WASTEFUL SPENDING TYPICAL OF THE SEASON, AND THE RETENTION OF MORE REGULAR WORK HOURS ARE ALL POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS FOR THE KINGDOM: FOR THE QUALITY OF PUBLIC AND FAMILY LIFE, AND -- IN A COUNTRY WHICH ASPIRES TO ACCEDE TO THE WTO, AND TO "SAUDI-IZE" ITS ECONOMY -- FOR THE LONG-TERM HEALTH OF THE ECONOMY AS WELL.

¶5. THE MESSAGE OF "BUSINESS AS USUAL" -- WHILE PERHAPS MOST EMPHATICALLY COMMUNICATED THROUGH THE SCHOOL CALENDAR -- HAS BEEN CONVEYED THROUGH A VARIETY OF OTHER MEANS AS WELL. RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND MEDIA COMMENTATORS HAVE EMPHASIZED IN THEIR SERMONS AND COMMENTARIES THAT THE FASTING REQUIRED OF MUSLIMS DURING RAMADAN DOES NOT MEAN THAT THEY SHOULD SHIRK THEIR WORK AND OTHER DUTIES; RATHER, A DEVOUT MUSLIM MUST CONTINUE HIS NORMAL COURSE OF LIFE -- AND WORK -- DURING THE MONTH OF RAMADAN.

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LEADING BY EXAMPLE  
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¶6. A COROLLARY TO THE OBSERVATIONS REGARDING BEHAVIORAL CHANGE INDUCED BY THE SCHOOL CALENDAR IS THE NOTICEABLE INCREASE IN THE LEVEL AND VISIBILITY OF PUBLIC ACTIVITY BY SAUDI LEADERS AND GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS. WHILE, AS IS ITS USUAL RAMADAN CUSTOM, THE CABINET HAS MOVED ITS WEEKLY SESSIONS DURING RAMADAN TO NIGHTTIME, ALL INDICATIONS ARE THAT THE GOVERNMENT IS EXERTING AN EFFORT TO CONDUCT "BUSINESS AS USUAL" DURING THE MONTH. THE MOST CONSPICUOUS EXAMPLE OF ACTIVE AND "HIGH-VISIBILITY" GOVERNMENT DURING RAMADAN WAS LAST WEEK'S ROLLOUT OF THE KINGDOM'S ANNUAL BUDGET, ACCOMPANIED BY CONSIDERABLE MEDIA ACCESS TO HIGH-LEVEL OFFICIALS. MEANWHILE, KING FAHD, CROWN PRINCE ABDULLAH, DEFENSE MINISTER PRINCE SULTAN, AND RIYADH GOVERNOR PRINCE SALMAN HAVE ALL MADE SEVERAL WELL-PUBLICIZED APPEARANCES DURING THIS MONTH -- INAUGURATING NEW PROJECTS, INSPECTING GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS, HOSTING VISITING FOREIGN LEADERS, AND ATTENDING PUBLIC EVENTS.

¶7. ON DECEMBER 27 ALONE, THE "HOME" PAGE OF THE "RIYADH DAILY" CARRIED COVERAGE OF THE MOROCCAN KING, THE BAHRAINI EMIR, AND THE SULTAN OF BRUNEI MEETING WITH SAUDI OFFICIALS (ALL IN MECCA TO PERFORM "UMRA," OR THE MINOR PILGRIMAGE). THE SAME PAGE REPORTED ON GRAND MUFTI AL-SHEIKH RECEIVING THE HEAD OF THE "DA'WA" (ISLAMIC CALL) CENTER IN LATIN AMERICA, THE SAUDI HAJJ COMMITTEE HOLDING A PLANNING MEETING, THE HEAD OF THE "SHOURA COUNCIL" RECEIVING A DELEGATION OF GCC CULTURAL OFFICIALS, AND THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL OF THE ARAB BUREAU OF EDUCATION FOR THE GULF STATES MEETING IN JEDDAH. SUCH A REPORTED LEVEL OF OFFICIAL ACTIVITY IS HIGH EVEN BY SAUDI NON-RAMADAN STANDARDS.

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THE BACKLASH  
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¶8. WHILE SOME SOCIETAL ELEMENTS HAVE REACTED WITH ACCEPTANCE, EVEN APPRECIATION OF THE "NEW" SAUDI APPROACH TO RAMADAN, RESISTANCE TO AND DISSATISFACTION WITH THIS CHANGE IS EVIDENT IN MANY QUARTERS. NOT UNEXPECTEDLY, TEACHERS ARE AMONG THOSE WHO ARE MOST VOCAL, A FACT REFLECTED IN THE

ANECDOTE CONVEYED IN PARA. 8 OF REFTEL (B). "AL-RIYADH" CHIMED IN ON THIS ISSUE ON DECEMBER 23 BY PUBLISHING AN "INVESTIGATIVE REPORT" ENTITLED "TEACHERS EXPRESS FRUSTRATION OVER WORKING DURING RAMADAN, AND SHOW UNEASINESS FOR TEACHING." THE ARTICLE CITES A NUMBER OF TEACHERS CRITICIZING THE NEW ARRANGEMENT:

-- A DEPUTY PRINCIPAL AT AN INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL, COMMENTING EMOTIONALLY: "THIS YEAR EXAMS COME IN THE MIDDLE OF THE MONTH OF RAMADAN, WHICH IN MY OPINION PREVENTS TEACHERS AND STUDENTS FROM OBSERVING THEIR RELIGIOUS DUTIES DURING THIS MONTH IN AN APPROPRIATE WAY. ... (STUDIES) DISTRACT A STUDENT FROM PERFORMING HIS RELIGIOUS DUTIES, FROM RECITATION OF THE QUR'AN, AND FROM CHARITABLE WORK DIRECTED TO THE ALMIGHTY DURING THIS HOLY MONTH, WHEN WE ARE REQUIRED TO DOUBLE OUR WORSHIP OF GOD. ... (AND) THE SAME APPLIES TO THE TEACHER. ... YOU CAN ONLY IMAGINE HOW A TEACHER CAN ... PERFORM HIS RELIGIOUS DUTIES DURING THIS HOLY MONTH";

-- A SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHER EXPRESSING SIMILAR VIEWS, AND ARGUING FOR "OBSERVING THE DUTIES OF THIS MONTH WITHOUT ANY ANNOYING OBLIGATIONS";

-- AN INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL TEACHER STATING: "MOST OF THE TEACHERS ARE FRUSTRATED BY CONDUCTING EXAMS DURING THE MONTH OF RAMADAN," ADDING "ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT PROBLEMS TEACHERS FACE DURING THIS MONTH IS LACK OF CONCENTRATION AMONG STUDENTS. THEY ARE STILL YOUNG AND FASTING AFFECTS THEM GREATLY..."

-- AND, FINALLY, A TEACHER WHO SUGGESTS THAT "90 PERCENT OF THE TEACHERS DO NOT TEACH PROPERLY DURING RAMADAN. IT IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR A TEACHER TO TEACH AN ENTIRE DAY WHILE HE IS FASTING." THIS TEACHER CONCLUDES HIS COMMENTS BY EXPRESSING HIS "HOPE FOR A RECONSIDERATION OF THIS ISSUE IN THE FUTURE," AND A RETURN TO THE STATUS QUO ANTE.

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YOU TOOK THE WORDS ...  
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¶9. SIMILAR SENTIMENTS ARE EXPRESSED IN AN ITEM IN THE DECEMBER 27 "ARAB NEWS," UNDER THE HEADLINE "PARENTS HAVE HARD TIME COPING WITH EXAMS DURING RAMADAN." THE ARTICLE OPENS WITH THE OBSERVATION: "WITH SCHOOL EXAMS STRETCHING WELL INTO THE HOLY MONTH THIS YEAR, IT SEEMS THAT FOR MANY PEOPLE RAMADAN LACKS ITS USUAL SPIRITUAL ATMOSPHERE. CHILDREN ARE BUSY STUDYING, THEIR PARENTS ARE HELPING THEM DAY AND NIGHT, AND TEACHERS ARE CORRECTING PAPERS. MANY READILY ADMIT THAT THEY HAVE NOT YET FELT THE SPIRITUAL CALMNESS THEY NORMALLY FEEL DURING THIS MONTH."

¶10. THE ARTICLE GOES ON TO GIVE VENT TO THE COMPLAINTS AND FRUSTRATIONS OF SEVERAL STUDENTS AND THEIR PARENTS, BEFORE CONCLUDING WITH THE COMMENT: "UNTIL EXAMS FINISH AT THE END OF THIS WEEK THE PEOPLE OF THE KINGDOM MUST ACCUSTOM THEMSELVES TO THESE CIRCUMSTANCES, AND CONCENTRATE ON MAKING THE LAST TEN DAYS OF THE MONTH A PURELY SPIRITUAL EXERCISE." THE CROWN PRINCE HIMSELF COULD NOT HAVE SAID IT ANY BETTER.

FOWLER